

The Extent of Self-Disclosure Between College Students and Their Parents

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Self-disclosure and topic avoidance are important factors in parent and child relationships and shape family communication. Research has been done on self-disclosure, focusing on not only parent-child relationships, but also sibling relationships, marital relationships and the differences between the gender roles in how they handle disclosure. It is safe to say that self-disclosure characterizes communication among families (Guerrero and Afifi, 1995). Findings indicate that a child's disclosure to his or her parent is related to the child's perceptions of overall quality of family communication (Papini and Farmer, 1990). This includes the openness of family communication, cohesiveness and personal satisfaction gained from the relationships. Age also influences disclosure, as Papini and Farmer (1990) discovered that 12 year-old children were more likely to emotionally disclose to parents whereas 15 year-old adolescents preferred to disclose to friends. This, of course, could be associated with the onset of puberty and the common experiences teens face as they mature. As adolescents age, disclosure with family members, particularly parents, is affected (Papini & Farmer, 1990). Strong evidence does indicate that what individuals become is associated with how members of the family interact as well as how they are perceived by other family members (Necessary, 1996).

A study performed by Jeanine M. Vivona (2000) dealt with parental attachment styles and the impact that these attachments have on late adolescents, with some focus on college students living away from home. Security in parental attachment was the primary concern in investigation. Boys and girls are equally likely to develop secure attachments

(Vivona, 2000). Secure women with a positive attachment to their parents functioned with more confidence during their adjusting to college. Those women whose parents did not provide that security found themselves functioning at a more difficult adjustment level. On the other hand, men were found to establish greater independency and suppress this attachment to parents. They were also determined to achieve independence and face challenges alone (Vivona, 2000). Women found comfort with dependency while men were associated with comfort from autonomy. Security of attachment is related to adjustment to college for both males and females; however, Vivona (2000) mentioned that due to sex differences favoring women, it would be necessary to investigate attachment styles and elements for men more specifically. This study sought to discover ways for students to achieve security and autonomy after leaving home for college and suggested orientation programs or forums for students to learn about the expected pressures.

Stein and Brodsky's (1995) findings supported the traditional western assumption that men are nonexpressive and in control of their emotions as compared to women. Women were found to be more caring, emotional and sympathetic to other's feelings. Stein and Brodsky (1995) sought to find the discrepancy between how participants believed they would disclose in a certain situation as opposed to how they actually responded. Women expressed more willingness than men to interpersonally self-disclose to female friends, male friends and spouses or lovers (Stein & Brodsky, 1995). When frustrated with an outside stimulus, women maintain their ability to self-disclose. Men, on the other hand, internalized their annoyance and distress, taking the role of maintaining strength and silence (Stein & Brodsky, 1995).

Looking at the differences in gender is especially important when dealing with self-disclosure. It is generally accepted that women disclose more easily and often than men, which will surely have an effect on men and women college students' relationships with their parents. According to Foubert and Sholley (1996), disclosure can be related to trust in that females placed more importance on trust than males. Women have been shown to trust their male friends even more than men trust their male friends. Women's higher level of self-disclosure overall could be partially explained by their higher trust and men's lack thereof. These gender roles carry over into marital relationships. Some studies suggest higher disclosure levels are more characteristic of those couples considered to be happily married. On the other hand, unhappily married couples are higher in disclosure of negative valence (Gilbert, 1976). Therefore, what is said is critical in determining disclosure outcomes (Gilbert, 1976). Gilbert (1976) suggests that it is not advocated to be less than open and honest, but rather carry a cautious sense of sensitivity and discrimination. Individuals in marital relationships often perceive the reward/cost factors in disclosing certain information, determining whether or not it is beneficial to inform the spouse (Davidson, Balswick & Halverson, 1983). The lack of reciprocity in disclosure or deviations from the norm will result in feelings of inequity, thereby lessening extent of self-disclosure. Intimacy should fulfill people's needs for belonging and companionship (Prager & Buhrmester, 1998). Men and women who communicate and self-disclose frequently and affectionately perceive that these needs of love and nurturance are consistently fulfilled (1998).

The issue of divorce and its effect on parental attachment has been investigated by researchers Julie Ensign, Avraham Scherman, and Jennifer J. Clark (1998), who found

that divorce is not related to a more distant parent-child relationship. Only conflict was found to have a significant negative correlation with closeness, thereby implying that parental conflict weighs heavier on children than the actual divorce (Ensign, Scherman & Clark, 1998). This suggests divorce is not a factor in determining the extent of self-disclosure between children and their parents.

Disclosure on the topics of relationship issues, negative-life experiences, dating experiences, friendships, and sexual experiences were investigated among adolescents and young adults in a recent study. Adolescents and young adults avoid discussing negative life experiences and dating experiences more with parents than siblings, and more with male family members over female family members (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995). Males practice avoidance more than females for all topics, except sexual experiences (1995). Females practiced the least topic avoidance concerning relationship issues and friendships. Males avoided discussing relationship issues, negative life experiences, dating experiences and friendships more than females. Reasons underlying topic avoidance were cited as well. According to Guerrero and Afifi (1995), four general reasons were cited for topic avoidance: 1) self protection, which includes avoiding judgment, criticism, and embarrassment, as well as wanting to avoid feeling vulnerable; 2) relationship protection, which includes the desire to avoid conflict, avoid eliciting anger from the partner and avoid relationship destruction; 3) partner unresponsiveness, which involves avoiding topics because one feels the partner will be unresponsive, think the issue is trivial, or lack the knowledge to handle the problem; and 4) social inappropriateness, which is the tendency to avoid those topics that one does not feel socially acceptable to discuss. In their study, unresponsiveness was a reason for topic

avoidance more when the target was male. Fathers and brothers may be viewed as less responsive than mothers and sisters. Relationship protection and social inappropriateness were cited as consistent reasons for avoiding discussion with parents. Overall, however, self protection was the most consistent reason given for topic avoidance. (Guerrero and Afifi, 1995).

For this study, I have chosen to also investigate disclosure on the topics of relationships issues, negative life experiences, friendships, dating relationships, and to add the following two topics: academic achievements and future plans. According to Bornholt and Goodnow (1999), influence of parents on adolescents in terms of expectations about academic achievement would be balanced by the influence that adolescents have on parents through disclosure of knowledge about academic activities. Father-child connections are strong when the content aligned with traditional expectations: stronger with daughters than with sons for English and stronger with sons than with daughters for mathematics. Mother-child associations display a more even pattern among sons and daughters, having only a few exceptions (Bornholt & Goodnow, 1999).

Although these studies have addressed parent and sibling relationships with adolescents, none have taken college students, those having completed at least their first year, and tested them on the six topics of relationship issues, negative-life experiences, dating experiences, friendships, academic achievement and future plans as well as the reasons underlying avoidance. Because I am dealing strictly with college students, I found it necessary to assess the disclosure related to academic topics as well as the topics addressed by Guerrero and Afifi (1995). I was interested in surveying college students

who had completed their first year, representations of those living at home and those living at college, in hopes of discovering the extent of self-disclosure between college students and parents.

Hypotheses

1. On the majority of topics, males will have higher mean "disclosure avoidance" scores than females.
2. On the majority of topics, male dorm residents will have higher mean "disclosure avoidance" scores than female dorm residents.
3. On the majority of topics, male commuters will have higher mean "disclosure avoidance" than female commuters.
4. On the majority of topics, dorm residents will have higher mean "disclosure avoidance" than commuters.
5. Of the reasons underlying self-disclosure, self protection will be the dominant avoidance factor between all males and females and their parents.

Method of Inquiry

By using a similar experiment performed by Guerrero and Afifi (1995), I tested sophomore, junior and senior college students during the fall semester. Subjects were 188 college students from East Texas Baptist University, including 16 living at home and 172 living away from home. Respondents consisting of both males and females were tested in 8 sophomore level literature classes.

Procedure

Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaires asking them about topics and the likeliness of avoidance with both the father and mother. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they avoid each topic on a Likert Scale, with seven representing “always avoid” and one representing “never avoid.” These questionnaires referenced mother and father separately in order to achieve the extent of disclosure to each parent individually. Also, students were instructed to refer to the closest mother “figure” or father “figure” if an immediate father or mother was not present. Students were also asked to indicate whether they lived on campus or commuted from home.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire, originally designed by Guerrero and Afifi, was administered to each student, dealing with topic-avoidance in self-disclosure with parents. Topics included relationship issues, negative life experiences, dating experiences, friendships, and academic achievements and future plans. For this study, I added the topics of academic achievements and future plans to Guerrero and Afifi’s scale. Questionnaires referenced fathers and mothers separately. Three items measured **relationship issues**: 1) *relationship norms*, dealing with the rules of the relationship, including time spent with one another, expectations, relationship roles, and acceptable behavior; 2) *state of the relationship*, including discussion of feelings toward one another and how the relationship is going; 3) *negative relational behavior*, defined as discussing past behavior that caused strain on the relationship. **Negative life experiences** was measured using two items: 1) *past negative experiences*, defined as discussing past behavior that was somehow emotionally traumatic, damaging to one’s image, or unpleasant to discuss, and

2) *failures*, which included discussing such issues as doing poorly on a test or being fired from a job. **Dating experiences, friendships, academic achievements and future plans** were measured with one-item scales.

After respondents rated topic avoidance with a family member, they were asked to rate twelve reasons for avoiding disclosure. Four items represented measurement of **self protection**: 1) it would leave me too vulnerable, 2) I would be embarrassed to disclose, 3) this person may judge me, 4) I prefer not to replay negative experiences. Three items computed **relationship protection**: 1) Disclosure could lead to conflict, 2) it might ruin the relationship, 3) it might make this person angry. Measuring **partner unresponsiveness** included four items: 1) This person will probably be unresponsive, 2) this person lacks knowledge relevant to my problem, 3) this person would view the issue as trivial, and 4) it would serve no useful purpose to talk about it. **Social inappropriateness** was scaled with a single item: It would be socially inappropriate to discuss this topic.

Analysis

Using a computer program known as SPSS (Statistical Program for Social Sciences) designed to calculate statistics, data was entered from the completed surveys. Independent t-tests were administered to calculate the significant differences in all cases. The cell means shown in charts below represent the average amounts of self-disclosure which were on a scale of 1 to 7. Higher cell means represent greater avoidance of the topics. For the reasons underlying self-disclosure, independent t-tests were administered to assess significant differences. Charts corresponding to these reasons below also display cell means. The higher cell means signify more agreement from the respondents.

Results
Sex Differences in Disclosure Avoidance to Mothers and Fathers: All Subjects

Table 1: Cell Means for All Males and Females

Topics		Father	Mother
Relationship Issues	Male	4.17	3.58
	Female	4.04	2.98
Dating Relationships	Male	4.07	3.25
	Female	3.94	2.76
Negative Life Experiences	Male	3.94	3.30
	Female	3.60	2.88
Friendships	Male	3.53	2.97
	Female	2.92	2.11
Academic Achievements	Male	2.82	2.48
	Female	2.38	1.98
Future Plans	Male	2.81	2.24
	Female	2.12	1.66

Note: Higher cell means represent higher topic avoidance

Relationship Issues: The data revealed a significant sex difference for avoidance of relationship issues with mothers ($p<.010$). Males were less likely to disclose to their mothers than females. Both males and females avoided disclosure with their fathers more than mothers.

Dating Relationships: Sex differences were insignificant ($p>.05$).

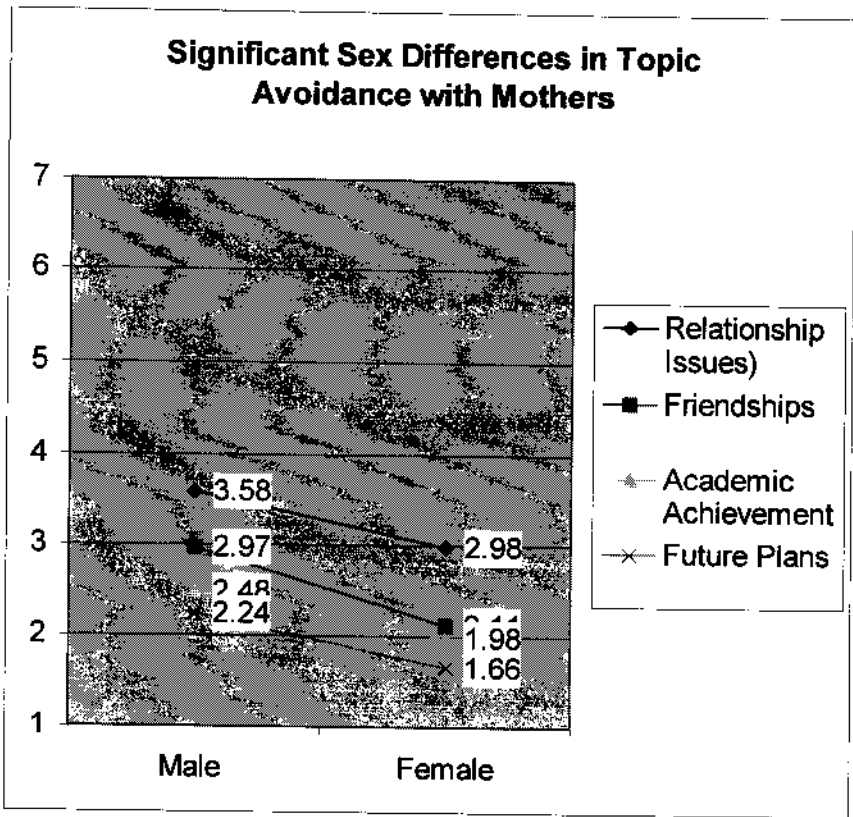
Negative Life Experiences: Sex differences were insignificant ($p>.05$) between discloser sex in avoidance with both mothers and fathers.

Friendships: A significant sex difference was found in disclosure avoidance to both mothers ($p<.001$) and fathers ($p<.046$). Males avoided disclosure with both mothers and fathers over females.

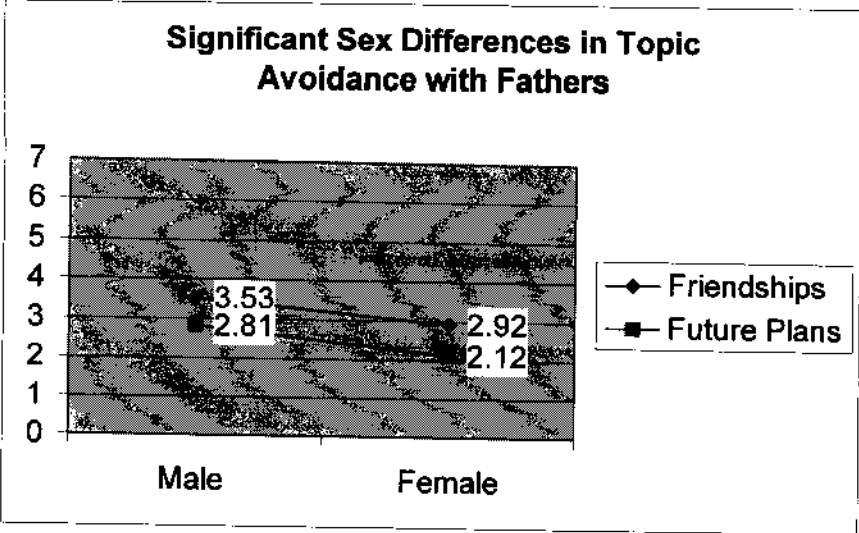
Academic Achievements: Data showed the discloser sex was significant in avoidance with mothers ($p<.032$). Males avoided disclosure with mothers and fathers more than females.

Future Plans: A significant difference was found between discloser sex in avoidance with mothers ($p<.006$) and fathers ($p<.011$). Males avoided disclosure with both mothers and fathers more than females.

Overall topic avoidance was greater with the fathers and male disclosers. Females tended to disclose more overall to both fathers and mothers. Both males and females disclosed to a greater extent to their mothers than to their fathers.



Note: High means indicate topic avoidance



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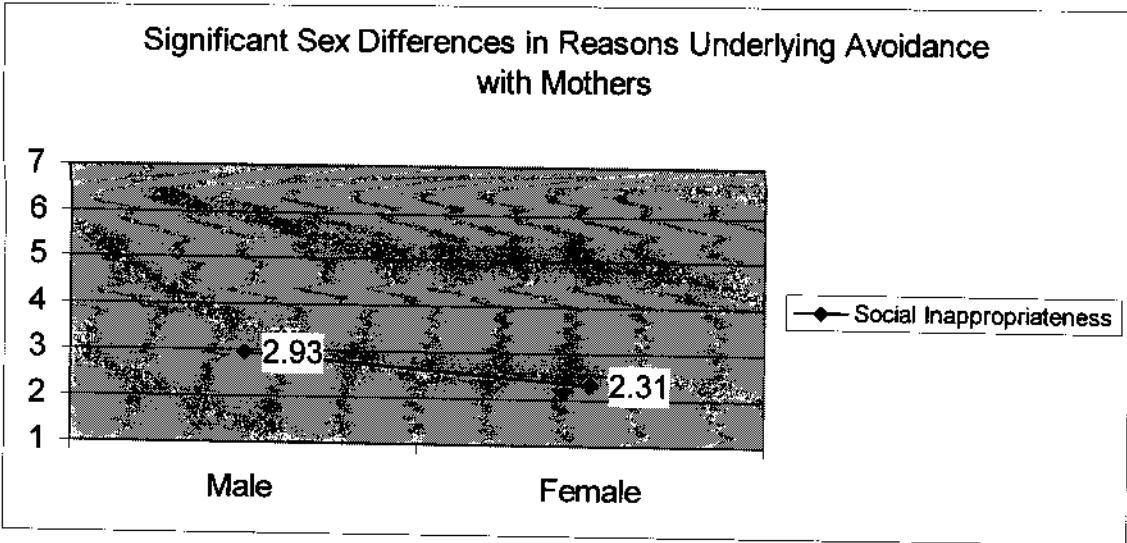
Reasons for Disclosure Avoidance to Mothers and Fathers: All Subjects

Table 2: Cell Means for Reasons Underlying Topic Avoidance (all dorm residents and commuters)

Topic		Father	Mother
Social Inappropriateness	Male	2.89	2.93
	Female	3.19	2.31
Partner Unresponsiveness	Male	3.16	2.89
	Female	3.54	2.76
Relationship Protection	Male	3.40	3.27
	Female	3.46	3.27
Self Protection	Male	3.63	3.62
	Female	3.68	3.48

Note: Higher cell means indicate higher endorsement rates.

Social Inappropriateness: The data revealed a significant sex difference in reasons for avoidance with mothers ($p<.009$). Males were significantly more likely than females to cite social inappropriateness as a reason for avoiding self-disclosure to mothers. Females avoided topics more with their fathers due to social inappropriateness than their mothers.



Note: High means indicate topic avoidance.

Partner Unresponsiveness: Nonsignificant data was revealed ($p>.05$).

Relationship Protection: No significant sex differences resulted ($p>.05$).

Self Protection: Although no significant sex differences data were found, this reason for avoidance was rated higher than the other three. This seems to be the greatest reason for avoiding disclosure with both mothers and fathers.

Sex Differences in Disclosure Avoidance: Dorm Residents Only

Table 3: Cell Means for Male and Female Dorm Residents

Topics		Father	Mother
Relationship Issues	Male	4.19	3.52
	Female	4.01	2.92
Dating Relationships	Male	4.10	3.29
	Female	3.84	2.63
Negative Life Experiences	Male	3.99	3.25
	Female	3.55	2.85
Friendships	Male	3.48	2.90
	Female	2.89	2.05
Academic Achievements	Male	2.90	2.53
	Female	2.43	1.97
Future Plans	Male	2.89	2.24
	Female	2.09	1.66

Note: Higher cell means represent higher topic avoidance

Relationship Issues: The results revealed a significant difference between discloser sex of $p < .015$ in avoidance with mothers. This topic, however, did have the highest avoidance scores for both males and females with their fathers than the other topics.

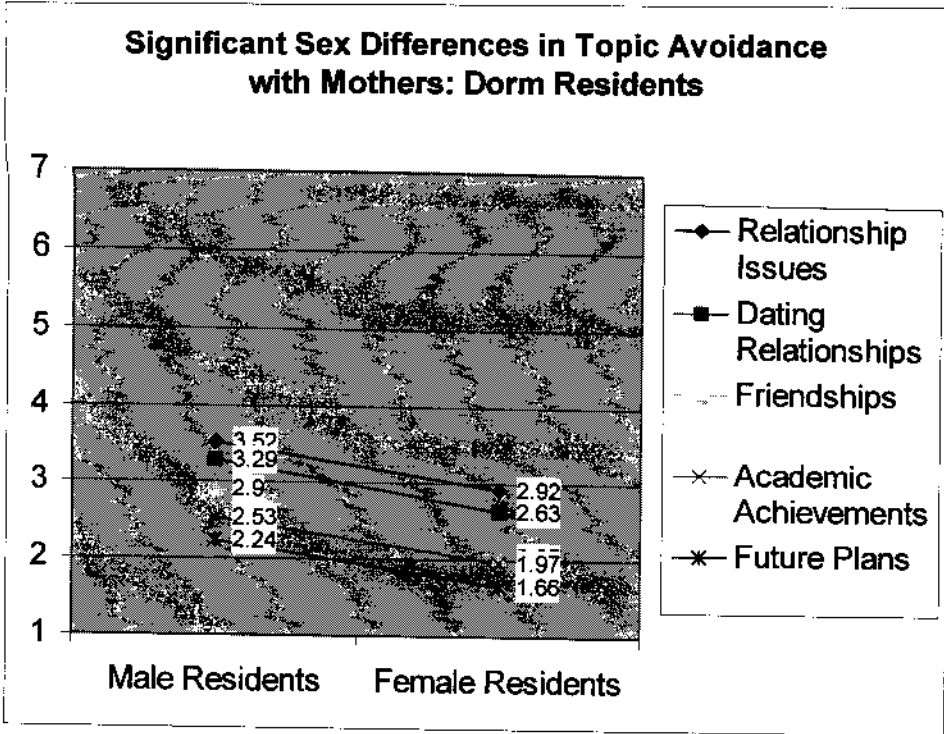
Dating Relationships: Data showed that discloser sex influenced avoidance with a significance of $p < .020$ associated with mothers. Males avoided the topic more than females with their mothers, but both males and females avoided the topic with their fathers over their mothers.

Negative Life Experiences: Nonsignificant data resulted ($p > .05$).

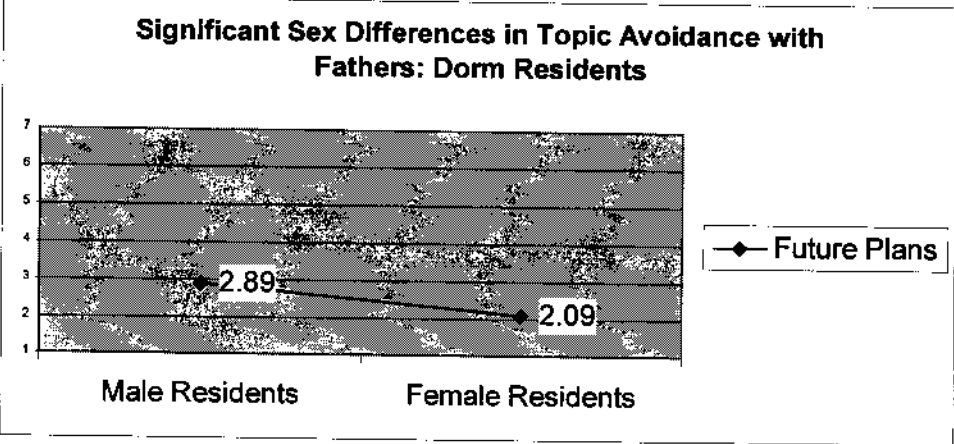
Friendships: A significant difference existed between discloser sex in avoidance with mothers ($p < .001$). Males and females avoided disclosing friendships with their fathers more than their mothers.

Academic Achievements: Results showed significance with discloser sex in avoidance with mothers ($p < .022$). Males disclosed achievements less with fathers and mothers as compared with females. Both males and females disclosed less to their fathers than mothers.

Future Plans: Significant differences occurred between discloser sex and mothers ($p < .007$) and fathers ($p < .006$). Females disclosed more to their mothers and fathers than males.



Note: High means indicate topic avoidance.

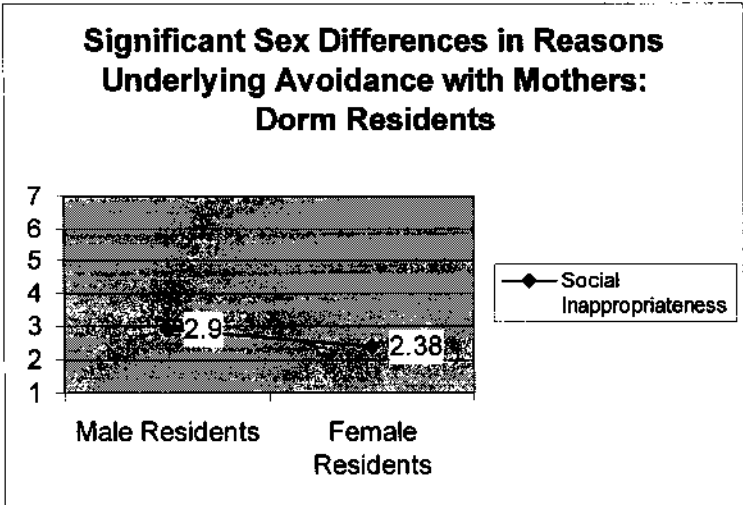


Note: High means indicate topic avoidance.

Table 4: Cell Means for Reasons Underlying Topic Avoidance (Dorm residents)

Topic		Father	Mother
Social Inappropriateness	Male	2.88	2.90
	Female	3.24	2.38
Partner Unresponsiveness	Male	3.17	2.89
	Female	3.57	2.80
Relationship Protection	Male	3.47	3.28
	Female	3.48	3.35
Self Protection	Male	3.65	3.65
	Female	3.72	3.51

Note: Higher cell means represent higher endorsement rates.
Social Inappropriateness: Only one significant difference was found in the underlying reasons for avoidance, this being social inappropriateness concerning mothers. A difference of $p<.036$ was revealed.



Partner Unresponsiveness: No significant data was revealed ($p>.05$).

Relationship Protection: Nonsignificant data resulted ($p>.05$).

Self Protection: No significance resulted ($p>.05$). This underlying reason did rate the highest of the other three which may signify that this is a primary reason for males and females to avoid disclosing. Females were in stronger agreement when concerning fathers.

Sex Difference in Disclosure Avoidance: Commuters Only

Table 5: Cell Means for Male and Female Commuters

Topics		Father	Mother
Relationship Issues	Male	3.94	4.39
	Female	3.97	3.17
Dating Relationships	Male	3.67	2.67
	Female	4.40	3.80
Negative Life Experiences	Male	3.25	4.00
	Female	3.85	3.00
Friendships	Male	4.17	3.83
	Female	3.10	2.70

Academic Achievements	Male	1.83	1.83
	Female	1.90	2.20
Future Plans	Male	1.83	2.17
	Female	2.10	1.33

Note: Higher cell means represent higher topic avoidance.

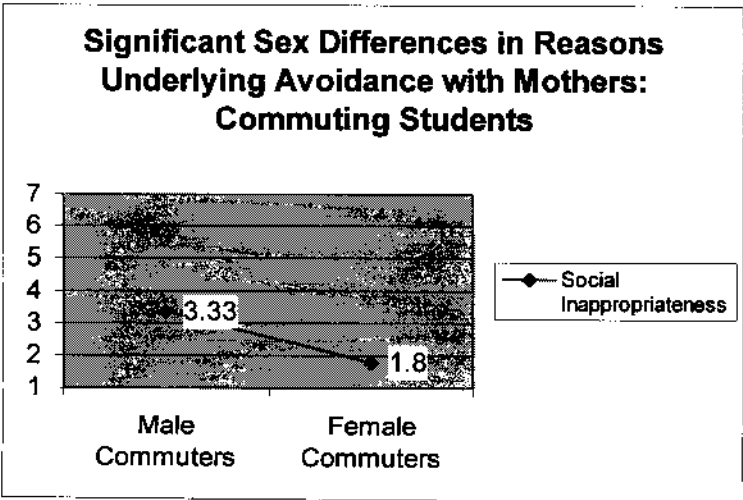
Relationship Issues, Dating Relationships, Negative Life Experiences, Friendships, Academic Achievements, Future Plans: No significant sex difference ($p>.05$) was revealed.

Table 6: Cell Means for Reasons Underlying Topic Avoidance (Commuters)

Topic		Father	Mother
Social Inappropriateness	Male	3.00	3.33
	Female	2.70	1.80
Partner Unresponsiveness	Male	3.08	2.88
	Female	3.08	2.23
Relationship Protection	Male	2.44	3.17
	Female	2.97	2.27
Self Protection	Male	3.42	3.21
	Female	3.08	3.13

Note: Higher cell means represent higher endorsement rates.

Social Inappropriateness: A significant difference existed between sexes in this reason for avoidance with mothers ($p<.05$). Other categories revealed no significant difference with discloser sex.



Partner Unresponsiveness and Relationship Protection: No significant sex differences resulted ($p>.05$).

Self Protection: Nonsignificant sex differences were revealed ($p>.05$). Overall, this was the greatest reason for avoiding disclosure. Males agreed more than females concerning fathers and mothers.

Difference in Disclosure Avoidance : Commuters and Dorm Residents

Table 7: Cell Means for Commuters and Dorm Residents

Topics		Father	Mother
Relationship Issues	Com	3.96	3.63
	DormRes	4.10	3.21
Dating Relationships	Com	4.13	3.38
	DormRes	3.97	2.95
Negative Life Experiences	Com	3.63	3.38
	DormRes	3.77	3.04
Friendships	Com	3.50	3.13
	DormRes	3.18	2.46
Academic Achievements	Com	1.88	2.06
	DormRes	2.67	2.24
Future Plans	Com	2.00	1.67
	DormRes	2.48	1.94

Note: Higher cell means represent higher topic avoidance.

The topics of Relationships Issues, Dating Relationships, Negative Life Experiences, Friendships, Academic Achievements, and Future Plans did not reveal any significant differences between commuters and dorm residents ($p>.05$).

Table 8: Cell Means for Reasons Underlying Avoidance (Commuters and Dorm Residents)

Topic		Father	Mother
Social Inappropriateness	Com	2.81	2.38
	DormRes	3.07	2.63
Partner Unresponsiveness	Com	3.08	2.47
	DormRes	3.38	2.85
Relationship Protection	Com	2.77	2.60
	DormRes	3.48	3.32
Self Protection	Com	3.20	3.16
	DormRes	3.69	3.58

Note: Higher cell means represent higher endorsement rates.

The following reasons underlying topic avoidance did not reveal significant differences between commuters and dorm residents ($p>.05$): **social inappropriateness, partner unresponsiveness, self protection and relationship protection.**

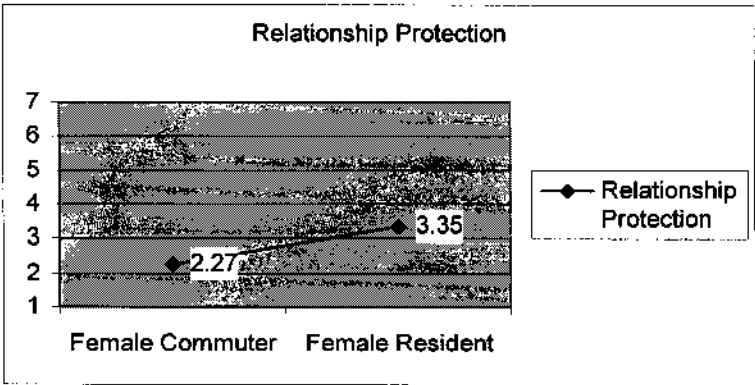
Disclosure Avoidance: Female Commuters versus Female Dorm Residents

All topics, **Relationship Issues, Dating Relationships, Negative Life Experiences, Friendships, Academic Achievements and Future Plans**, yielded no significant differences between female commuters and dorm residents ($p>.05$).

Reasons Underlying Topic Avoidance: Female Commuters versus Female Dorm Residents

Only one underlying reason for avoidance revealed significant results, this being **relationship protection.**

Relationship Protection: A significant difference ($p<.032$) was found between female commuters and female dorm residents concerning relationship protection as a reason to avoid disclosure with their mothers. Female dorm residents were more likely to agree that they avoid certain topics to protect the relationship.



Nonsignificant results ($p > .05$) were found for these reasons: **social inappropriateness, partner unresponsiveness, relationship protection and self protection**. Overall, self protection maintained higher endorsement rates than the other possible reasons.

Topic Avoidance: Male Commuters versus Male Dorm Residents

All topics, **Relationship Issues, Dating Relationships, Negative Life Experiences, Friendships, Academic Achievements and Future Plans**, yielded insignificant differences between male commuters and male dorm residents ($p > .05$).

Reasons Underlying Topic Avoidance: Male Commuters versus Male Dorm Residents

Data revealed nonsignificant differences between male commuters and male dorm residents ($p > .05$) for the following reasons underlying avoidance: **Social Inappropriateness, Self Protection, Relationship Protection and Partner Unresponsiveness**. **Self Protection** held the highest score of the possible reasons underlying avoidance.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

H1: On the majority of topics, males will have higher mean “disclosure avoidance” scores than females.

Comparing all males and females, the results were consistent with H1. Both males and females avoided all topics more with their fathers and were more open to disclosing to their mothers. Females disclosed all topics more than males, and the greatest amount of disclosure occurred between mothers and daughters. Relationship issues,

dating relationships and negative life experiences had the highest avoidance scores for both males and females. Significant sex differences occurred with the topic of relationship issues, friendships, academic achievements and future plans. As Guerrero and Afifi (1995) noted, it seems that overall females tend to disclose more than males to both mothers and fathers; in addition, it was also discovered in this study that males are more apt to disclose to their mothers on all topics than to their fathers. Generally speaking, these results are most normal, as people tend to disclose more to women than to men. Women are more likely to disclose more information concerning personal, intimate topics than men (i.e. relationship issues and friendships).

However, the avoidance of topics of academic achievements and future plans revealed significant sex differences. Both males and females were more likely to disclose to their mothers than their fathers concerning these issues. Females were much more likely to discuss their academics with their mothers than males. This could possibly be explained if overall the mother takes on the role of inquiring about grades and achievement in school. Females may be more inclined to share their achievements in school than males simply because they feel a greater sense of accomplishment (i.e. due to making good grades, receiving academic awards, etc). On the other hand, some males, taking on more masculine autonomy, may shy away from discussing academic achievements because they feel this topic is not necessary to discuss in order to achieve a feeling of accomplishment or encouragement from their parents. Instead, males maybe would rather discuss school intramural sports or fraternities they are involved with. The topic of future plans revealed significant sex differences with both mothers and fathers. Males avoided disclosure with both mothers and fathers more than females. It is possible

males do not feel the need to discuss their future careers because, from personal experience, it seems that most males have a pretty set idea of what it is they would like to do after graduation from college. Females, like myself, feel the need to discuss their feelings, ideas, advantages and disadvantages of taking on a particular career(s), seeking guidance from parents. Females may also feel it is necessary to seek their parents' approval in choosing a career more so than males who may desire greater independence from their parents when making decisions about the future.

H2: On the majority of topics, male dorm residents will have higher mean "disclosure avoidance" scores than female dorm residents.

Results were fairly consistent with H2 concerning the extent of self-disclosure in the father-child relationship and mother-child relationship with college male and female dorm residents. The highest avoidance mean was found with males in avoiding disclosure to their fathers concerning relationships issues. Overall, male dorm residents avoided more topics than females. Both males and females withheld from their fathers more often than their mothers. Relationship issues, dating relationships and negative life experiences held the highest avoidance scores for males avoiding communication with their fathers. Significant differences were found on relationship issues, dating relationships and friendships between males and females in communication with their mothers. Females also showed an increased avoidance with their fathers on these three topics, more so than the topics of friendships, academic achievements and future plans. Although the topics of friendships, academic achievements and future plans had lower avoidance scores, significant sex differences did exist between males and females concerning their mothers. Females were more open to these topics than males when communicating with their

mothers. As noted, it seems that overall females tend to disclose more than males to both mothers and fathers; in addition, it was also discovered in this study that males are more apt to disclose to their mothers on all topics than to their fathers. It seems from these results that topics of friendships, academic achievements and future plans are considered more casual topics, which are not threatening to a parent-child relationship. These topics may be discussed more freely, often without emotional attachment and should not affect the relationship, a possible explanation why both males and females obtained lower avoidance scores on these issues. The topic of future plans also revealed significant results between discloser sex and their mothers and fathers. Again, this could be partly due to females feeling it more important to seek parental approval, especially being away from home. In fact, from personal experience as a dorm resident, I have discovered that most college females desire parental guidance concerning their academics and future decision-making dealing with career plans. New responsibilities and sometimes-difficult decisions may encourage female residents to seek parental wisdom in these cases.

H3: On the majority of topics, male commuters will have higher mean “disclosure avoidance” than female commuters.

Consistent with H3, female commuters did self-disclose on the majority of topics to a greater extent than males. However it must be noted that these results are less reliable than the other results because of the limitations in number of commuters. The results were slightly variant from those concerning the dorm residents. No significant differences were found on any topic. As noted before, females avoided disclosure with their fathers over their mothers, but I do find it interesting to point out that male commuters were varied in their scores. It is interesting that intimate topics such as

relationship issues and negative life experiences were shared more with their fathers. This could partly be explained by the fact that these commuters live at home. It seems that there may be more opportunities for conflict if the student resides with his or her parents. Conflict at times requires for an explanation or outburst of emotions. It is also possible that the father-son bond is stronger when a child lives at home. Also, commuters who return home everyday may be more likely to share the details of the day, whereas dorm residents spend less time talking with their parents. Dating relationships produced interesting results, as males disclosed more than females to both mothers and fathers. It is possible that males and females disclose these topics of dating in different ways, as males may tend to explain the details of time spent with another, while females may be more apt to disclose their emotions and feelings behind the time spent with a boyfriend. If this be the case, males do not feel as threatened to disclose details and events instead of emotions. Overall, the lowest avoidance scores came with the topics of academic achievements and future plans, whereby both male and female commuters were quite open to these topics of discussion.

H4: On the majority of topics, dorm residents will have higher mean “disclosure avoidance” than commuters.

Due to dorm residents being away from home, I was under the impression that that they would have higher mean “avoidance disclosure” than commuters. However, comparing dorm residents and commuters brought slightly different results than expected for H4. No significant results were found when comparing dorm residents and commuters. This may have varied if the number of commuters had been larger as compared with the number dorm residents.

H5: Of the reasons underlying self-disclosure, self protection will be the dominant avoidance factor between all males and females and their parents.

Although a few cases have significant differences, self protection was the highest scoring underlying reason for avoiding disclosure with both fathers and mothers. This seems realistic as most people would agree that one of the most important people they will protect is themselves, whether it be physically, emotionally or intellectually. Not that this implies selfish behavior, but instead a characteristic that most human beings tend to exhibit in our society. Maintaining our pride and self-worth is an important aspect in our relationships with others.

Male and female dorm residents scored significantly different in the category of social inappropriateness concerning mothers. Males were more likely to feel a topic was socially inappropriate to discuss with their mothers than females. Females agreed when it concerned their fathers. Disclosing to opposite sex members can account for such agreement, as the factor of sex comes into play. Males and females may be able to easily disclose to a same-sex member of the family and feel it is appropriate, whereas disclosing to an opposite sex member, who may not share the same perspectives, is not as comfortable. Self protection rated highest in means among the reasons underlying topic avoidance. Although there was not a significant difference, this does not discredit the possibility that this could be the primary reason for avoiding disclosure with mothers and fathers.

Results for male and female commuters were similar to the dorm residents. Self protection was the highest reason underlying avoidance, and social inappropriateness had a significant difference between sexes for avoidance with mothers. Male commuters and

dorm residents both held higher agreement scores for relationship protection with their mothers. Here again, it is possible that males, overall wanting to refrain from excessive intimacy, are more apt to avoid disclosing in order to protect the relationships with their mothers. The results comparing female commuters and female dorm residents showed a significant difference in relationship protection. Female dorm residents were much more likely to avoid communication on a topic in order to protect the relationships with their mothers. This is interesting because female commuters actually live at home with their mothers and it seems the results would show a higher agreement means; however, this was not the case. It is possible that because it is direct same-sex communication, often on a day by day basis, female commuters may not be threatened to maintain peace. Female dorm residents do not see their families as often, thereby explaining their desires to maintain harmony and protection in their relationships with their mothers.

Dorm residents away from their homes may not feel as exposed and are able to select what and how much they communicate due to a possible decrease in communication. Decreased communication may bring a greater sense of independence and increase the desire for self protection. Less dependence on parents, together with a decrease in communication, may not have an effect on the closeness with parents, but may affect the selection and extent to which topics are discussed.

Future Research

Nearly all of the relationships studied for this paper were considered "close" on average with both mother and father. Some of the topics were still avoided, but this does not necessarily call into question the closeness between family members. It is possible that avoided disclosure in some cases may have been beneficial, or if not beneficial,

certainly not detrimental to the relationship. Or perhaps, different subjects are of higher importance in some families than others. For families who focus more on their relationships, students who avoided these issues may bring harm, but for those families who are more interested in the day-to-day details of friendships and school activities, discussing feelings may not be stressed. For future studies it may be interesting to look at the entirety of the family and see what topics are important as a whole. This may influence the function of the family in many aspects of life, including the children's ability to handle responsibility, emotions and future decisions. It would also be of value to investigate the differences between what children feel are more important to disclose as compared with the parents' ideas on what they would like their children to disclose. Do parents set the tone for what topics and to what extent a topic is disclosed? And, do children tell their parents what they want to hear or how they truly feel about a certain topic? It would be interesting to study the motivations behind disclosing with one another.

Perhaps because this study was done at a private Christian university, the results were moderate in avoidance, most topics disclosed to an average amount. This does not mean that this university being a Christian university had a direct effect on the results, but it may be advantageous to repeat the study at a state university to see how the topic avoidance and reasons underlying compare. It would also be an advantage to achieve a greater number of commuters. East Texas Baptist University has a very small percentage of commuters as a whole, thereby the sample in this study was small compared with the dorm residents. It is possible a larger school could provide a greater number of commuters to expand the results.

Factors of divorce, step families, blended families and extended families were not considered in this paper; however, it may be beneficial to explore the differences in topic avoidance. Race and ethnicity were not specifically studied either, although it may be of interest to study how such may affect topic avoidance. Other cultures may vary in the topics of importance and the closed-ness and openness of families. Such a study could benefit this university and others in helping to understand the international students and how they best communicate.

In its totality, this paper is beneficial to our university as well as other universities, future researchers and possibly even family professionals, not to mention parents of commuters and dorm residents. Communication will occur whether something is verbally said or not. No communication is still communication in the sense that it relates the desire not to disclose. Knowing what topics are avoided and the reasons underlying may allow parents to encourage disclosure or at least be aware of why their children will not share experiences or feelings with them. In addition, intimacy often fulfills people needs for a sense of belonging, a source of rewarding companionship and relief from loneliness (Prager, 1998). Children who participate in disclosure or intimate relationships with their parents may even be less susceptible to stress or demonstrate better well-being as they mature. How a child learns to communicate may possibly affect his or her communication in the future with family members, teachers and business associates. Family life is where communication typically begins, the first steps taken and the first words spoken. The way a family communicates and behaves will shape a child. Parents need to be aware of how disclosure patterns can affect their children as they grow and develop into adults. Communication or the lack thereof can influence future career

choices, marriage relationships and the next generation of parent-child relationships. For future references, studying the various types of families, the willingness to disclose certain topics and reasons underlying, and taking into consideration race and ethnicity will be of great value to not only researchers and professionals, but to families themselves.

References

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